

Unveiling Christ in the Islamicate World: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Prophetology as a Model for Christian Apologetics in Gregory Bar 'Ebrōyō's Treatise on the Incarnation

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Abstract

When looking for original lines of Christian apologetics in response to Islam from later periods, a unique vantage point is offered by the bilingual authors of the 'Syriac Renaissance', such as the West Syrian ('Jacobite') scholarly bishop of the thirteenth century, Gregory Bar 'Ebrōyō. This contribution builds upon previous scholarship on the latter author's borrowings from Muslim sources in composing his own writings, and in particular on his use of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's theological compendium *Muḥaṣṣal afkār al-mutaqaddimīn wa-l-muta'akhhirīn*, in his principal work on Christian theology, the *Lamp of the Sanctuary* (*Mnōrat qudṣē*). It is argued that Bar 'Ebrōyō's reliance on Rāzī's proofs of prophecy in the treatise on the Incarnation goes much further than hitherto assumed, as the Muslim theologian's prophetology served as the model for his Christian apologetic defense of the doctrine of the Incarnation.

Keywords

Christian apologetics – Syriac Renaissance – Gregory Bar 'Ebrōyō – *Lamp of the Sanctuary* – Incarnation – Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī – *Muḥaṣṣal* – Christian-Muslim theological interaction

* The current contribution is based on the master's thesis which was prepared under the supervision of Prof. Herman Teule at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, Belgium. I thank the two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on an earlier draft of the manuscript.

1 Introduction

The early ‘Abbāsīd period is widely regarded as the most creative period of Christian-Muslim theological interaction in the Islamicate world. This positive perception is due in particular to the efforts of the ninth-century apologists of the three major Christian denominations, such as the Melkite Theodore Abū Qurra, the West Syrian Abū Rā’īta, and the East Syrian ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī, to name only the most important, all of whom sought to articulate and uphold their Christian doctrines of faith in forms fine-tuned to their new Islamic context. Their apologetic ingenuity seems explicable to a large extent by the fact that, although rooted in the Syriac-speaking world, they all were fluent in Arabic, in addition to being well-informed of Islamic doctrine and the developing modes of theological discourse. The other side of the high scholarly estimation of the early period, however, is that apologetic works from later periods tend to be understudied in comparison.¹ Since acquaintance with Arabic and immersion in Islamic intellectual culture seem to be important prerequisites for finding original lines of apologetics, it might also be worthwhile to closely consider the bilingual authors active during the so-called ‘Syriac Renaissance’ (1026–1318), a period of Syriac literary revival which bears, among other characteristics, the markings of the influence of Islamic culture and thought on Syriac Christians.²

The most pertinent author to investigate for our aims undoubtedly is the West Syrian Maphrian and polymath Gregory Bar ‘Ebrōyō (1226–1286), whose rich literary output in both Syriac and Arabic amply testifies to his broad knowledge of Islamic scholarship and literature. He is known for having made Syriac

1 The number of dissertations and monographs on the contributions of the three above-mentioned early Christian apologists in the last decade is telling: Beaumont, *Christology in Dialogue with Muslims*; Keating, *Defending the ‘People of Truth’*; Bertaina, *An Arabic Account of Theodore Abu Qurra*; Mikhail, *Ammār al-Baṣrī’s Kitāb al-Burhān*; Ricks, *Early Arabic Christian Contributions to Trinitarian Theology*; Husseinī, *Early Christian-Muslim Debate on the Unity of God*; Awad, *Orthodoxy in Arabic Terms*; Maróth, *‘Ammār al-Baṣrī. Das Buch des Beweises*; Varsányi, *Ninth-Century Arabic Christian Apology and Polemics*.

2 Teule, “The Syriac Renaissance”; idem, “La renaissance syriaque”. A recent noteworthy contribution to the study of Christian apologetics during this period is found in the PhD dissertation on ‘Abdīshō’ bar Brikhā (d. 1318) by Salam Rassi, *Justifying Christianity in the Islamic Middle Ages*. Furthermore, a dissertation providing an in-depth study of the treatise *Against the Arabs* (*Luqbal Ṭayōyē*) by Dionysius Bar Ṣalībī (d. 1171) is under preparation by the current author, with the support of the Research Foundation—Flanders (FWO). Although not addressed in this contribution, original apologetical lines might also be found in texts written during the ‘Copto-Arabic Renaissance’ of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, see Sidarus, “La Renaissance Copte arabe”.

translations of some Muslim scholarly works, but even more so for having often drawn upon Muslim sources in both content and form, in the process of composing his own writings. Such borrowings from Muslim intellectual achievements are not only attested in works on more secular subjects, such as natural sciences, philosophy, grammar, and literature, but has, more surprisingly, also been found in those specifically dealing with religion.³ A case in point is the *Ethicon*, a guide for spiritual and moral life written for both monks and lay-people, which is modelled after the four-fold structure of Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*. Besides the structure, the content is also greatly influenced by this work on Muslim piety and morality, to the extent that it even brings Bar 'Ebrōyō to new interpretations of traditional Christian spiritual practices such as pilgrimage and prayer.⁴ These reinterpretations are significant, for they suggest that he found some value in Ghazālī's spiritual views. Another indication of a certain spiritual congeniality with this renowned Muslim thinker is found in the autobiographical account in his *Book of the Dove* (*Ktōbō d-yawnō*), a work closely related to the *Ethicon*. This account in turn seems to be modelled after Ghazālī's description of his personal spiritual growth as reported in his *Munqidh min al-dalāl*.⁵

If such a Muslim influence is evident even in the field of spirituality, the heart of Christian life, one wonders what the situation might be in the case of Christology, the heart of Christian doctrine. Moreover, especially on the latter topic, we might expect the most pressing apologetic urgency on the part of Christians living in *dār al-Islām*, given the fact that the doctrine of the Incarnation and, intrinsically related to it, the Trinity, are the two main Christian teachings which are manifestly rejected by Islam.⁶ To uncover Bar 'Ebrōyō's take on the Muslim critique of Christian doctrine and the way in which he

3 The most comprehensive overview of Bar 'Ebrōyō's life and work is found in Takahashi, *Barhebraeus: A Bio-Bibliography*. For an overview of his Syriac translations of Muslim works and a listing of the several works (out of 46 known writings) identified as being modelled after Muslim works, see *ibid.*, pp. 96–99.

4 Teule, "Barhebraeus," pp. 604–606, and further references.

5 *Ibid.* pp. 606–607; see also Takahashi, "The Influence of al-Ghazālī".

6 A strong concern for the challenges posed by Islamic doctrine has already been found in Bar 'Ebrōyō's treatise on free will in the *Lamp of the Sanctuary*; an observation which even further raises the expectations about his dealings with the much more fundamental issue of Christology. See Poirier, "Bar Hebraeus et le libre arbitre," p. 24: "Ce thème s'imposait à Bar Hebraeus comme un des éléments essentiels de sa synthèse théologique, et aussi en raison d'une nécessité apologetique créée par la rencontre des musulmans pour qui la question de la possibilité de la liberté humaine et des conditions de son exercice constituait un point central dans la réflexion théologique"; and p. 36: "Il est donc clair que Bar Hebraeus a conçu

blends his knowledge of Islamic scholarship into Christology, we turn to his treatise on the Incarnation, which is the fourth part, or “base” (*šetestō*) as he calls it, of his 12-volume theological encyclopedia the *Lamp of the Sanctuary* (*Mnōrat qudšē*).⁷ We will begin by outlining the contents of the apologetic part of the treatise with particular attention to the Muslim objections, which have been the focal points of previous scholarly investigations. Then we will analyze Bar ‘Ebrōyō’s apology for the Incarnation developed in the pages preceding his explicit dealings with Islam, and we will discuss the Muslim influences found therein. To conclude our study, we will evaluate the significance of his contribution to Christian apologetics.

2 The Treatise on the Incarnation: Content and State of the Art

Bar ‘Ebrōyō’s principal work on Christology bears the title *On the Incarnation of God the Word* (*Meṭul Metbarnšōnuteh d-Alōhō Meltō*),⁸ and is divided into three chapters, providing an apology for the Incarnation, the scope of the current study, followed by three chapters dealing with intra-Christian disputes on Christology.⁹ In the first chapter, he affirms the formal possibility of a union (*ḥdōyutō*) between the divine and the human by presenting various rational arguments backed up by testimonies from scripture and pagan authors, and by refuting a series of objections against such possibility.¹⁰ After this exposition, he briefly outlines in the second chapter his apologetic program, namely, the

son *De libero arbitrio* en fonction de la problématique, traditionnelle à son époque et dans son milieu, de la théologie musulmane”.

- 7 The critical edition and French translation of the fourth “base” is provided by the late Maronite bishop Joseph Khoury in “Le Candélabre du sanctuaire de Grégoire Abou’lfaradj dit Barhebraeus. Quatrième Base: de l’Incarnation”, hereafter Khoury.
- 8 Bar ‘Ebrōyō seems to prefer the term *‘Metbarnšōnutō*’, literally ‘Becoming-Human’ or ‘Humanization’ over *‘Metbasrōnutō*’, meaning ‘Becoming-Flesh’ or ‘Incarnation’. This preference could be motivated, as Panicker has suggested, by his concern to emphasize the full humanity of Christ against opponents of miaphysite Christology, see Panicker, *The Person of Jesus Christ*, pp. 127–130. Since the former term (‘Humanization’) sounds rather awkward rendered into English, we invariably translate it as ‘Incarnation’.
- 9 For studies on Bar ‘Ebrōyō’s rather exceptional ecumenical attitude and chapters four to six of his treatise on the Incarnation, see Hage, “Ecumenical Aspects”; Teule, “It is not Right”; Pinggéra, “Christologischer Konsens”; Panicker, *The Person of Jesus Christ*.
- 10 For the use of pagan prophecies by Bar ‘Ebrōyō and other Syriac authors, see Brock, “A Syriac Collection”; idem, “Some Syriac Excerpts”.

basis and criteria by which he holds that certain knowledge that the union between God and man has already taken place in Christ can be acquired. In the third and final apologetic chapter, the particular signs (*šūdō'ē dīlōnōyē*) that affirm Christian belief about Christ are fully spelled out, predominantly miracles but also prophecies, followed by refutations of the objections raised by seven sets of contrary opinions called 'heresies' (*heresīs*), which do not accept the Incarnation on the basis of miracles.

Throughout the treatment of these heresies, the contrary opinions they assert tend to intensify from rather general points of contention to more concrete issues. While the first five heresies contest matters such as the possibility of miracles, their alleged divine origin and particular evidentiary function, only the last two heresies address the objections of defined religious communities, the Jews and the Muslims. The final heresy thereby constitutes the first explicit reference to Islam and Muslim beliefs about Christ in the entire treatise:

Seventh heresy: that of the Muslims (*mašlmōnē*) who say: Christ is the one who was expected and the prophets have truly prophesied about him. However, he is neither God (*Alōhō*) nor Son of God (*Breh d-Alōhō*) but only God's prophet and servant (*nbīyeh balhud d-Alōhō w-'abdeh*).¹¹

The eight Muslim objections which are subsequently treated raise standard Muslim criticisms of Christian doctrine: (1) the Trinity is incompatible with God's unity; (2) belief in the Trinity amounts to polytheism; (3) Christ's human attributes disprove his alleged divinity; (4) a union between the divine and the human is impossible; (5) the generation of Christ requires a union or conjunction with someone else on the part of God; (6) the apostles ought to be regarded as 'Sons of God' as well, as Christ taught them to speak of 'our' Father; (7) Christ and the miracles he performed offer no grounds to differentiate him from the prophets; (8) God himself has rejected belief in the Trinity and Incarnation in the Qur'ān through the prophetic utterances of Muḥammad.

The succinct formulation and refutation of the bulk of these objections stands in stark contrast with the more elaborate treatment of the seventh and, *a fortiori*, the eighth objection.¹² What is at stake in the latter discussion is the evidence for Muḥammad's prophethood, ultimately the basis for ascribing any authenticity to the Qur'ān as divine revelation. Unsurprisingly these lines have

¹¹ Khoury, III, 2, 7, pp. 104–105.

¹² The seventh objection and its refutation dealing with Christ's uniqueness will be treated below.

attracted the lion's share of scholarly interest for Bar 'Ebrōyō's dealings with Islam in this treatise, for here he demonstrates a remarkable familiarity with Muslim apologetic thought, which sets this section apart from the more traditional considerations given previously.¹³ The objection centers around three classic Muslim apologetic proofs for the veracity of Muḥammad's prophetic office (*dalā'il*, *'alāmāt*, *imārāt al-nubuwwa*):¹⁴

Eighth objection. They say: Muḥammad is the prophet (*nbīyō*) and apostle (*šlīḥō*) of God, and God said through his mouth: 'Those who confess the Trinity certainly disbelieved' (cf. Q 5:73), and likewise: 'God is one, he does not beget nor is he begotten, nor is another equal to him' (Q 112). That Muḥammad is a true prophet and apostle of God is known on account of three [proofs]. First, by the miracles (*tedmrōtō*) he performed; second, by his customs and directions (*znaw w-dūbōraw*); third, by the fact that the prophets of old have prophesied (*etnbīw*) beforehand about him.¹⁵

As examples of these proofs are then mentioned the miracle of the Qur'ān and its inimitable style, Muḥammad's predictions of future events, other miracles dealing with unnatural events, and the prophet's exemplary moral uprightness. Finally, Bar 'Ebrōyō quotes the Qur'ānic prooftexts implying that Muḥammad is found inscribed in the Torah and the Gospel, and was announced by Christ as the messenger to come (Qur'ān 7:157; 61:6).

It is unnecessary to speculate on the source from which Bar 'Ebrōyō derived the three Muslim proofs. He himself basically tells us in the refutation where he acquired the material, in one of the rare instances in which he mentions an Arabic source by name. To illustrate Muslim strategies to cope with the uncertainties surrounding Muḥammad's miracles by focusing on the ensemble of miracles rather than on isolated cases, he explicitly quotes from the theological compendium *Muḥaṣṣal afkār al-mutaqaddimīn wa-l-muta'akhhirīn* of the

13 The scholars that considered this Muslim objection and Bar 'Ebrōyō's refutation of it all looked as well at his later revision of the discussion in the *Book of Rays* (*Ktōbō d-zalgē*), the later abridged and reworked version of *Mnōrat qudšē*, in which he added a polemical argument against the scriptural reliability of the Qur'ān based on Muslim authorities. See Nau, "Deux textes de Bar Hébraeus"; Griffith, "Disputes with Muslims," pp. 269–271; Roggema, "Ibn Kammūna's and Ibn al-'Ibri's Responses". See also Roggema, "Pour une lecture," pp. 286–288.

14 See Fahd, "Nubuwwa", EI².

15 Khoury, III, 2, 7, pp. 110–111.

Ash'arite *mutakallim* Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210).¹⁶ This quotation contains in a similar wording the same three proofs given before in the objection:

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī has said in the book *al-Muḥaṣṣal* (*mwhṣl*): It is in three ways that we affirm his mission. First, because he said: 'I am the messenger of God', and his miracle (*tedmurteh*) which is the Qur'ān affirmed his statement. Second, by his virtuous customs and directions (*znaw w-dūbōraw myatrē*). If every one of these in particular does not indicate his quality of prophethood, their ensemble necessarily indicates that they can only occur to prophets. This kind of proof has been chosen by al-Jāḥiẓ and has pleased al-Ghazālī in the book *al-Munqidh* (*mwnqd*). Third, the fact that the prophets have beforehand prophesied (*etnbīw*) about him in their heavenly books.¹⁷

Although Bar 'Ebrōyō seems to have summarized and simplified it in his usual manner, the quoted passage nonetheless matches the Muslim scholar's opening discussion of prophecy in the fourth part (*al-rukn al-rābī'*) of the *Muḥaṣṣal*.¹⁸ Another instance of borrowing from these same pages of Rāzī to rebut Muḥammad's prophethood has already been pointed out by Barbara Roggema, who showed, interestingly enough, that Bar 'Ebrōyō rendered Rāzī's critical remark about Muḥammad's 'miraculous' foretelling of future military victories into a counter-argument of his own.¹⁹

16 Extensive borrowings from Rāzī's *Muḥaṣṣal* in *Mnōrat quḍṣē* have already been identified in the first "base" on knowledge and the tenth "base" on the resurrection: see Takahashi, "Reception of Islamic Theology"; Koffler, *Die Lehre des Barhebräus von der Auferstehung der Leiber*. Furthermore, another one of Rāzī's writings, *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqīyya*, is found to be a primary source for the parts dealing with mineralogy, geography, and meteorology in the second "base" on creation: see Takahashi, "The Greco-Syriac and Arabic Sources". For the reception of Rāzī's works by Syriac and Coptic Christians in general, see Schwarb, "The Coptic and Syriac Reception"; idem, "The 13th Century Copto-Arabic Reception"; see also Takahashi, "Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Qazwīnī and Bar Shakkō".

17 Khoury, III, 2, 7, pp. 116–119.

18 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, ed. Sa'd, p. 208; Horten, *Die spekulative und positive Theologie*, p. 83. Most of the further alleged illustrations of Muḥammad's prophethood reported by Bar 'Ebrōyō in the objection are borrowed from the same section of the *Muḥaṣṣal*, see Khoury, p. 111 (note 40). Rāzī's views on the proofs for prophecy as expressed in the *Muḥaṣṣal* seem to represent an early, more traditional stage in his thinking on the subject. For the development of Rāzī's understanding of prophecy, see Abrahamov, "Religion versus Philosophy"; Griffel, "Al-Ġazālī's Concept of Prophecy".

19 Roggema, "Ibn Kammūna's and Ibn al-'Ibri's Responses," p. 205.

As these adoptions from the *Muḥaṣṣal* at the end of his apology show Bar ‘Ebrōyō’s ingenuity in applying Islamic scholarship to a Christian apologetic context, scholars have been drawn to it for good reasons. Nevertheless, the reliance on Rāzī’s proofs of prophecy for refuting Muḥammad’s prophethood is only the ‘tip of the iceberg’ of Bar ‘Ebrōyō’s use of this source. To uncover what lies underneath, we need to shift the scholarly focus on his explicit refutations of Islam to hitherto insufficiently explored depths, namely his positive apologetic program found in the second chapter and further developed in the third chapter of his treatise. That his dependence on the *Muḥaṣṣal* extends beyond the mere use of it at very end of his apology has to a certain extent already been brought up by its modern editor in his introduction and a few notes scattered throughout. Yet, Khoury’s observations on this point remain partial and are unsatisfactory in particular with regard to his evaluation of the significance of these appropriations. Building on his findings, a more comprehensive account of the influence of Rāzī’s *Muḥaṣṣal* on Bar ‘Ebrōyō’s Christology will be offered here, which will also attempt to do justice to his originality as a Christian apologist.

3 The Apologetic Program

Methodological Basis: Continuous Testimony

Having asserted the formal possibility of a union between one of the divine hypostases with a human hypostasis,²⁰ Bar ‘Ebrōyō proceeds by outlining his apologetic methodology in the second chapter, which carries the title *That the union has already taken place in Christ Our Lord*. The first step he undertakes in this short chapter, is to establish the basis on which he intends to demonstrate that Christ is the locus of the union between God and man. This basis is the principle of reliable transmission of reports about past events, which he calls “continuity of testimonies” (*tkibūt sōhdwōtō*). He distinguishes between two kinds of such ‘continuous testimony’: the testimony of eyewitnesses who *saw* the object of their witness, and the testimony of those who only *heard* it from others who, in turn, heard it from others, and so on all the way back to the original eyewitnesses. He then goes on to define the necessary conditions for the accurate transmission of both types of testimony. Their validity, he writes,

20 The first chapter on the possibility of the Incarnation is beyond the scope of the current contribution. I intend to publish my findings concerning the sources and apologetic strategies used there later.

is governed by two rules (*trēn qōnūnē*): (1) that the persons testifying should be in number considerable enough that they cannot possibly agree on a lie or conspire to testify falsely; and (2) that the object of testimony should be sensible (*metraqšōnō*) and not intelligible (*methawnōnō*), that is, the object must be empirical and not purely conceptual.²¹

The concept described above probably rings a bell to those familiar with *ḥadīth* sciences, legal methodology (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), or Islamic theology (*ʿilm al-kalām*). As Khoury had already rightly pointed out, *tkībūt sōhdwōtō* is nothing other than the Syriac rendering of the Arabic *tawātur*.²² The term *tawātur* is the *maṣḍar* of form VI of a verb meaning ‘to come one after another’ and can roughly be translated as ‘recurrent transmission’ or ‘broad authentication.’²³ This concept is used in Islamic scholarship to indicate the epistemic value that a given report about the past conveys, based on the presupposition that a sufficient number of transmitters of an empirical report precludes the possibility of error and collusion. It is the answer of the Islamic tradition to how it is possible to acquire certainty about reports without direct empirical knowledge of the reported events themselves. Reliable knowledge about past events is, of course, crucial to Islam, a religion firmly rooted in history; for without it fundamental issues would be arbitrary, such as the fact that Muḥammad was a prophet, that the Qurʾān was revealed to him and no other, that he performed prayer five times a day, distributed alms, and performed the pilgrimage.²⁴ Without solid information on these points, the very foundations of Islamic belief would collapse. Hence, one easily understands why *mutawātir* reports have usually been regarded by Muslim scholars to convey eyewitness-like knowledge that the receiver of it cannot possibly contest, so-called *ʿilm ḍarūrī*, necessary knowledge.²⁵

Adopting this Islamic concept as the basis of Bar ʿEbrōyō’s Christological edifice is highly significant, as it already signals the extent to which Bar ʿEbrōyō will draw upon Islamic thought to defend the veracity of the Incarnation, however paradoxical that may sound. That he seemingly was well informed about the concept of *tawātur* can be confirmed by the accuracy of his description. The

21 Khoury, II, 1, pp. 28–31.

22 Ibid., p. 29 (note 12), p. 9.

23 Juynboll, “Tawātur”, EI²; see also Wensinck and Heinrichs, “Mutawātir”, EI².

24 Hansu, “Notes on the Term *Mutawātir*,” p. 393. Muslim polemicists have at times accused both Christians and Jews that the transmission of the text of the Bible fails to live up to the standards of *tawātur*, and thus lacks reliability, see Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, pp. 41–49.

25 See Abrahamov, “Necessary Knowledge”.

two rules mentioned therein correspond to the conditions of *tawātur* found in Muslim writings extant during his days, such as in Ghazālī's *al-Mustasfā min 'ilm al-uṣūl*, in which it is stated that

there are just two conditions governing the occurrence of knowledge: (1) that the number (of persons making the statement) be adequate and (2) that these persons be making the statement on the basis of certainty (*yaqīn*) and empirical observation (*mushāhada*).²⁶

Apparently, Bar 'Ebrōyō shared the Muslim confidence in the epistemic value of *mutawātir* reports as well, as he emphasizes several times that continuous testimony assures the accuracy of historical reports. This claim is made most forcefully when dealing with the contrary opinion of those who deny the value of continuous testimony. The seven objections which are raised, basically all variations of the suspicion that eye-witnesses and transmitters can propagate lies, are discarded with one swift rebuttal: knowledge coming from continuous testimony conveys "necessary knowledge" (*yida'tō ananqōytō*), and is therefore not subject to doubt even if contrary arguments or proofs are presented.²⁷ The concept of *yida'tō ananqōytō* used here by Bar 'Ebrōyō, can only be his Syriac rendition of the Muslim concept of *'ilm ḍarūrī*. Further justification of his principle of "continuity of testimonies" is simply deemed superfluous, undoubtedly another indication of the soundness and reliability he must have perceived in the Muslim understanding of *tawātur*.

Three Ways of Confirming the Union in Christ

Having established the Islamic principle of continuous testimony as his methodological basis, Bar 'Ebrōyō unfolds how he intends to demonstrate the truth of the Incarnation from there. It is by the *ex auditu* type of continuous testimony, he says, that it can be known with certainty that the union of the hypostasis of the Word with a human hypostasis has already taken place in Christ. For indeed, he argues, we have heard from various people speaking different languages that they heard from others, who in turn heard it from others all the way back to the testimony of some people, that they have seen Christ in the world. Moreover, they heard him say about himself (*'al napšeh*) that he is Son of God (*Breh d-Alōhō*) and Son of man (*Breh d-nōšō*),²⁸ as is written in the

26 Quoted in Weiss, "Knowledge of the Past," p. 90. The actual source from which Bar 'Ebrōyō borrowed his discussion of *tawātur* is unclear.

27 Khoury, II, 2, 1–2, pp. 32–37.

28 Note that the Christological titles 'Son of God' and 'Son of man' refer respectively to Christ's divinity and humanity, according to Bar 'Ebrōyō.

Gospel, and he did astonishing miracles to confirm his statement (*tedmrōtō tmīhōtō ak da-l-šūrōr melteh*). Furthermore, they witness that the prophecies of previous prophets (*nbiyawōtō da-nbīyē d-menqdīm*) have been realized in him, and that he has appeared in the world and has left the world in an unparalleled manner. Through such testimony, Bar ‘Ebrōyō concludes, we have acquired true knowledge (*yida’tō mōrōnōytō*), exempt from all doubt and hesitation, that Christ truly is the one whose coming was expected, who is at the same time God and man (*Alōhō w-barnōšō*).²⁹

This passage contains the crux of Bar ‘Ebrōyō’s apologetic program. The argument is, in a nutshell, that the truth of the union in Christ can be indisputably known on the basis of three kinds of proof established through continuous testimony: (1) Christ himself claimed to be both divine and human, and miracles have confirmed the veracity of these words; (2) Christ fulfilled the prophecies; and (3) Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection are unique and unprecedented. The further attention devoted to each of these points is, however, largely disproportionate in chapter three, entitled *On the particular signs that confirm the Incarnation of God the Word through continuous testimony, and on the refutation of contrary arguments*. Only the opening section is devoted to prophecies,³⁰ while one has to wait until the seventh Muslim objection for the issue of Christ’s uniqueness to be taken up. The miracles performed by Christ and the apostles in his name, on the other hand, take up the bulk of the third chapter and are the primary signs said to confirm the Incarnation. After a short exposition of the definition and function of miracles, Bar ‘Ebrōyō provides a list of no less than 57 miracles of various types which all affirm the God-man nature of Christ.³¹ Furthermore, the series of objections raised by the seven heresies basically all contest, as already mentioned, the reliability of proving the Incarnation on the basis of miracles.³² Given Bar ‘Ebrōyō’s extensive reliance on miracles, a closer look at these appeals is warranted first and foremost, for indeed, something peculiar is taking place here.

29 Khoury, II, 1, pp. 30–31.

30 Khoury, III, 1, 1, pp. 37–41.

31 Khoury, III, 1, 2, pp. 41–62. The most interesting set of miracles is without a doubt the seven ‘intelligible’ miracles operated in Christ’s name after his ascension. These miracles recall the recurrent Christian apologetic line to list several unworthy motives for adhering to a religion, in such a way that Islam is discredited of being in any way the true religion. On this theme, see Griffith, “Comparative Religion”; Swanson, “Apology or its Evasion?”.

32 Khoury, III, 2, 1–7, pp. 63–122. The only exception seems to be the Jews, whose objections concern not so much Christ’s miracles, but the enduring validity of the Mosaic Law.

Do Miracles 'Only' Validate Christ's Self-Statements?

It is not the stress on miracles as such that is noteworthy, however. As Sidney Griffith rightly observed, "almost all of the Christian apologists argued that the decisive factor in proof of the claim of Christianity to be the true religion is the attestation of evidentiary miracles worked in testimony to its veracity by Jesus, and those worked in Jesus' name by his apostles and the disciples".³³ Bar 'Ebrōyō's emphasis on miracles thus at first sight seems merely to be in line with the established tradition of Christian apologetics in the Islamicate world. Nevertheless, his unprecedented stress on Christ's self-statements and, even more so, his assertion that Christ's miracles have authenticated the words he uttered about himself *do* come rather unexpectedly.

Before providing his lengthy list of miracles, Bar 'Ebrōyō offers an illuminating preamble on miracles in general. In it, he defines the miracle as "an action different from the habit of nature which is only possible for God as the creator of nature".³⁴ These divine interventions, he says, can be directly attributed to God, such as the creation *ex nihilo*, or they can occur through an intermediary (*b-īday meṣ'ōyō*), literally 'by the hands of a mediator', such as the miracles God manifested through the saints (*b-īday qadīšē*). What follows reveals that the latter mediated type functions as a divine endorsement and therefore supreme approval of the words and deeds of the mediator who requested a miracle from God for that reason:

That is why, when a man utters a certain statement (*meltō medem*) and asks God to effect a miracle through him (*b-īdaw*) if he is truthful (*šarīr*), and God then does this through him, everyone necessarily knows that it is on behalf of God that this man says and does what he says and does, for God is not a confirmer of falsehood, far from it!³⁵

Then to which category, direct or indirect, do the miracles of Christ, God incarnate, belong? Somewhat surprisingly, for Bar 'Ebrōyō it is the latter. He repeats several times that the miracles performed by Christ are mediated,³⁶ and are therefore akin to those of the prophets, apostles, and saints. Although it seems somewhat paradoxical that he intends to demonstrate that Christ *is* God while stating simultaneously that God performs miracles *by means* of him,

33 Griffith, "Answering the Call of the Minaret," p. 116.

34 Khoury, III, 1, 2, pp. 40–43.

35 Khoury, III, 1, 2, pp. 40–41.

36 Khoury, III, 1, 2, pp. 36–37, 61–63.

(that is, external to him), he does not seem to show the least concern about descending into an apparent contradiction on this point.

This ambiguity already goes to some length in explaining why it is difficult, if not impossible, to find any precedents for such an interpretation of Christ's miracles. The effected alignment between Christ's miracles and those of other prophets seems somewhat counter-productive when seeking to uphold Christ's divinity in a context which radically denies that he is 'more' than a prophet. Previous apologists instead directed their efforts at securing the distinct and direct character of the miracles performed by Christ, often by contrasting them to the inferior nature of those of the prophets. In doing so, they usually stressed that only Christ worked miracles in his *own* name and by his *own* divine authority. The West Syrian Metropolitan of Amid, Dionysius Bar Ṣalībī (d. 1171), drawing on earlier Christian apologetic texts, expressed this as follows in his treatise *Against the Arabs*:

Again, we say that even though Moses as well as Elisha and the prophets worked wonders, they accomplished them through prayers (*b-yad ṣlowōtō*), and not by their own command and authority (*b-pūqdōnō w-ṣūlṭōnō mōrōnōyō*), as Christ did.³⁷

To further illustrate the novelty of what Bar 'Ebrōyō is proposing, we might turn to yet another writing, the *Kitāb al-Majālis* (*Book of Sessions*) of the East Syrian Elias of Nisibis (d. 1046). In the second session, Elias' Muslim interlocutor, the *wazīr* Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī, pointed out various similarities between Christ and other prophets with the intent of refuting the divine character Christians ascribe to Christ. During this lengthy discussion, the miracles manifested by Christ and Moses are also subjected to a comparative scrutiny. Elias thereby rebuts al-Maghribī's assertion that Moses operated miracles similar to those of Christ by emphasizing, just as Bar Ṣalībī did later on, the essential difference between the signs and miracles (*al-āyāt wa-l-mu'jizāt*) that both manifested. Those of Moses, Elias says, were only worked indirectly, namely on the command of God (*amr min Allāh*) or after supplications (*taḍarru'*), while those of Christ were realized directly (*'alā l-fawr*). The latter claim is then supported by various miracles narrated in the Gospel as well as the Qur'ān. Bar 'Ebrōyō quite certainly knew this passage; he even adopted the materials of the broader discussion in a summarized and systematized way as his seventh Muslim objec-

37 Bar Ṣalībī, *Against the Arabs*, ed. p. 43, tr. p. 42.

tion and refutation.³⁸ What is striking, however, is that, while he borrowed virtually all other counter-arguments provided by Elias, he omitted the argument from essential difference. Instead, he replaced it with a declaration of the *uniformity* of the miracles performed by Moses and Christ, and all other prophets for that matter: their miracles came to *confirm* their respective self-statements. In the case of Moses, they confirmed his claim to be a prophet, and in Christ's case, his claim to be divine:

Elias of Nisibis, *Book of Sessions*

Your statement that Christ has not done signs and miracles the likes of which Moses would not have done is invalid, because Moses was not announced by one of the chosen who preceded him, and when God sent him to Pharaoh, God did not manifest a miracle directly by him; Moses only did it on the command of God or after supplicating [God]. [...] His [i.e. Christ's] signs and miracles were realized directly, without delay, and without supplicating God, like his saying to the one who was dead: 'Rise!'; and he rose, and to the paralytic: 'Stand up!'; and he stood, and to the leper: 'I want you clean!'; and he was clean, and to the one who was sick: 'You are healed!'; and he was healed, and to the one who was blind: 'I granted sight!'; and he gained vision, and to Satan: 'Leave this man!'; and he left him, and to the agitated sea:

Bar 'Ebrōyō, *Lamp of the Sanctuary*

Furthermore we say again: the ascension of Elias confirmed (*sharar*) his prophethood, but the ascension of Christ his divinity, as also the miracles of Moses and other prophets confirmed their prophethood (*nb̄yūthon*), but the miracles of Christ his divinity (*alōhūteh*). This is because these said that they were prophets, but Christ said that he was God and Son of God, as is written in the Gospel.³⁹

38 Further discussion on this borrowing is provided below. For a study of this theme, see Thomas, "The Miracles of Jesus".

39 Khoury, III, 2, 7, pp. 116–117.

Elias of Nisibis, *Book of Sessions*

Bar ʿEbrōyō, *Lamp of the Sanctuary*

‘Be calm!’, and it became calm, and other events which the Holy Gospel narrates. Also the Qurʾān testified that he spoke in the cradle, and imparted the form of birds to clay, and when he breathed on them, they immediately took off. What is left to those of the Muslims who believe they can compare Moses to Christ by the signs and miracles they performed?⁴⁰

No longer is the quality of the miracles a criterion for a differentiation between Christ and the prophets for Bar ʿEbrōyō; what alone counts is the words these divine interventions were intended to corroborate. By reworking his source along these lines, Bar ʿEbrōyō thus has consciously *redefined* the classical Christian understanding of Christ’s miracles as intrinsic demonstrations of his divine power, to extrinsic affirmations of Christ’s words pertaining to his divine-human identity. Although the end-result is the same, the procedure is strikingly different. What could possibly have driven him to redefine the function of miracles in such a different way from what had been common to Christian apologetics? The answer is fairly evident, given all that we know about the various ways in which Bar ʿEbrōyō was influenced by Islamic thought.

4 Modelling Christology on Islamic Prophetology

Confirmatory Miracles

Although Bar ʿEbrōyō’s particular view of miracles as confirmations of self-statements sounds somewhat strange judged from a Christian perspective, it sounds familiar from an Islamic angle. What he is describing is, in fact, nothing other than the classical Ashʿarite understanding of miracles performed by prophets. According to Ashʿarī (d. 324/936), the goal of the prophetic miracle,

40 Cheikhō (ed.), “Maḡālīs,” p. 116; Delly (tr.), *La théologie d’Élie*, p. 84.

understood as a divine intervention contrary to the normal habit of things, is to divinely attest the veracity (*ṣidq*) of the one through whom the miracle is manifested, thereby proving his claim to be an authentic prophet.⁴¹ In other words, if someone claimed to be a prophet and these words were confirmed through the manifestation of a miracle, then he truly was a prophet. The parallelism with Bar ʿEbrōyō comes to light at this point as the same logic is applied by him to Christology: If Christ claimed to be divine ('Son of God') and human ('Son of man'), and these words were confirmed through the miracles he manifested, then he truly was both God and man.

The reader probably already suspects what the actual source for Bar ʿEbrōyō's particular understanding of miracles might be. I would like to repeat the first lines of his above-mentioned quotation from the *Muḥaṣṣal*:

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī has said in the book *al-Muḥaṣṣal*: It is in three ways that we affirm his mission. First, because he said 'I am the messenger of God' and his miracle which is the Qur'ān confirmed his statement (*ṣarrat melteh*) [...].

A closer inspection of Bar ʿEbrōyō's summarizing quotation of Rāzī's first proof reveals that the Ash'arite conception of the prophet's confirmatory miracle is already present here. However, the principle of *tawātur* as the warrant for the truth of reports dealing with prophets which Bar ʿEbrōyō transplanted into Christology seems to be absent here. A look at the original passage in the *Muḥaṣṣal*, however, shows us otherwise, for he simply omitted Rāzī's reference to *tawātur*:

Muḥammad is the messenger of God; we prove it in various ways against the Jews, the Christians, the Magians, and a group of the materialists. First, he has claimed prophecy (*iddaʿā al-nubuwwa*), and reliance (*taʿwīl*) is upon him, and the miracle (*al-muʿjiz*) has been manifested by him. Everyone who acts in this way would be a prophet. When we say that he claimed prophecy, it is because of *recurrent transmission* (*tawātur*), and when we say that the miracle has been manifested by him, it is because of three reasons. One of them is that he brought the Qur'ān, and the Qur'ān is a miracle, and whether he came with the Qur'ān or without it is known through *recurrent transmission* (*tawātur*), and that it is a miracle

⁴¹ Gimaret, *La doctrine d'al-Ash'ari*, pp. 461f.

we know because he challenged the most eloquent to equal it, and they were unable to do so.⁴²

These observations lead only to one conclusion: Bar ‘Ebrōyō’s argument from miracles, as well as the principle of ‘continuous testimony’ which underpins his entire apology, are modelled after Rāzī’s prophetology. Moreover, a comparison of both scholars’ discussions of what miracles are and of how they function shows the indebtedness on the part of Bar ‘Ebrōyō.⁴³ Yet, the most telling indication of this modelling is without a doubt his Christological adoption of a short allegory depicting how it is that miracles confirm authentic prophecy. In it, Rāzī compares the divine confirmation of Muḥammad’s prophethood with a man (*rajul*) standing up among a crowd claiming to be the messenger of this king (*rasūl hādhā l-malik*). If the messenger pleads for the king to rise from his throne to affirm his assertion, and the king responds positively, Rāzī says, then all are obliged to believe that this man truly is his *rasūl*. Bar ‘Ebrōyō revisits the allegory and moulds it according to his own purposes. In his version, the logic is similar, but he writes instead about a child (*ṭalyō*) claiming to be the *son* of the king (*breh d-malkō*). If the king confirms the child’s claim by answering his plea, everyone knows that he spoke the truth. This, Bar ‘Ebrōyō concludes, is the case with Christ:

Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*

Bar ‘Ebrōyō, *Lamp of the Sanctuary*

We say that the one who claimed prophecy and by whom a miracle was manifested is a prophet. For if a man would stand up among a great crowd saying: ‘I am the messenger of this

It is as if a child would advance towards a king seated on the throne of his power, saying: ‘I am the son of the king’. Seeing that those who are present are doubtful of his word, he

42 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, ed. Sa’d, p. 210 (my italics). For the role of *tawātur* in Rāzī’s proofs of prophecy in the *Muḥaṣṣal*, see Abrahamov, “Religion versus Philosophy,” p. 416. In later writings, however, Rāzī seems to have shown increasing reservations on the reliability of *mutawātir* reports, see Griffel, “Al-Ġazālī’s Concept of Prophecy,” pp. 106–113; Whittingham, “How Could So Many Christians Be Wrong?,” pp. 173–174.

43 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, ed. Sa’d, p. 207, 210. In a 14th-century Arabic summary by Daniel ibn al-Khaṭṭāb of the parts of the *Lamp of the Sanctuary* dealing with the Trinity and the Incarnation, the author directly quotes from the *Muḥaṣṣal* instead of translating the section on miracles from the Syriac text; see Sepmeijer, “The Book of Brilliance,” p. 384.

Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal***Bar ‘Ebrōyō, *Lamp of the Sanctuary***

king sent towards you’, and then says: ‘O King, if I was truthful (*ṣādiq*) speaking in this way, act contrary to your custom and rise from your place’. If the king then rises, those who are present will be compelled to believe him. It is the same here.⁴⁴

says to the king: ‘If my word is true, let me sit with you on your throne’. If the king immediately lets him sit with him, then everyone who is present will necessarily believe that he is the son of the king. So it is with Christ Our Lord [...].⁴⁵

This certainly is the most revealing example of the creativity Bar ‘Ebrōyō employs in ‘Christianizing’ Rāzī’s prophetology. Khoury already noted this borrowing, but failed to grasp the reinterpretation of the standard miracle-based Christian apologetics it entails.⁴⁶ Still, Bar ‘Ebrōyō takes another step in using the *Muḥaṣṣal*, for the framework of the ‘seven heresies’ that deny the Incarnation on the basis of miracles seems to be derived from the contrary opinions which Rāzī himself raises against the proof of Muḥammad’s prophethood through miracles. He mentions the following possible objections: (1) miracles are simply impossible; (2) the actor of the miracle could be someone else besides God; (3) the person confirmed by God could still be untruthful; and (4) God did the miracle for another reason than to confirm the prophet’s veracity.⁴⁷ These opinions are adopted by Bar ‘Ebrōyō as the framework for his first four heresies, to which he then added the fifth heresy of those who say that the Incarnation is unnecessary, the sixth heresy of the Jews, and the seventh heresy of the Muslims.⁴⁸ At the end of our survey of Bar ‘Ebrōyō’s argument from

44 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, ed. Sa’d, p. 208.

45 Khoury, III, 1, 2, pp. 40–41.

46 Khoury, p. 41 (note 25): “Cette allégorie est presque littéralement empruntée à Al-Muḥaṣṣal de Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī”.

47 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, ed. Sa’d, pp. 209f.

48 Many of the pro- and counterarguments which Rāzī provides for the four contrary opinions appear to be borrowed by Bar ‘Ebrōyō as well in refuting the first four ‘heresies’. Judging from its contents, it seems evident that also the “fifth heresy” deals with Islam. It provides an interesting discussion of the relation between God’s guidance through the Incarnation, human free will, the soteriological need for the Incarnation, and the (in)adequacy of sending prophets in guiding humanity. More research is required to identify the source(s) he used and to contextualize the materials present there.

miracles, we thus come to the remarkable conclusion that Rāzī's prophetology has to be regarded as Bar 'Ebrōyō's model and main source for his principal argument for the Incarnation. In this respect, Khoury's statement that the *Muḥaṣṣal* "a été mis à une large contribution" in his discussion on miracles is perhaps even more true than he realized.⁴⁹ To assess the extent to which the *Muḥaṣṣal* plays a role in Bar 'Ebrōyō's two other arguments is our next task.

From Confirmatory Miracles to Confirmatory Prophecies

Prophetic testimony, central to Christianity in preparing the advent of Christ, holds a similar role in Islam with regard to the coming of Muḥammad. According to Ash'arī, a true prophet can, besides evidentiary miracles, also be acknowledged by means of the testimony of previous prophets who announced his coming and described or named him.⁵⁰ Such a proof of prophecy is considered especially valid in the case of Muḥammad, whose coming is said to be foretold in the Torah and the Gospel (Qur'ān 7:157), and by his direct predecessor *Īsā ibn Maryam* (Qur'ān 61:6). As we saw above, Bar 'Ebrōyō not only quoted from the *Muḥaṣṣal* the proof from prophecies, but also these two Qur'ānic verses.

Bar 'Ebrōyō's brief discussion of prophecies in the opening section of chapter three,—no more than three pages in Khoury's edition—, is rather meager in comparison with the much more elaborate discussion of miracles. In it, he provides five short biblical testimonies, all of which are said to affirm the Incarnation: Gn 49:10; Ps 12:19; Jes 7:14; Jer 31:31–32; Dan 9:24–26. These seem to be among the standard Old Testament passages typologically interpreted as pointing towards Christ's advent.⁵¹ More interesting than these quotations themselves, however, are the brief comments that Bar 'Ebrōyō adds to each one. These indicate that he, once again, seems to appeal in a particular way to the classical Christian argument from prophecies. The quoted testimonies do more than simply announcing Christ's coming: they also *confirm* his testimony to be both divine and human. This is already made clear in his comment on the first prophecy, in which he states that, since Christ is truly the one who was foretold by it, it is also "necessary that his testimony (*sōhdūteh*) should be true (*šarīrtō*),

49 Khoury, p. 9.

50 Gimaret, *La doctrine d'al-Ash'ari*, p. 459.

51 Some of these biblical verses appear as well in other Syriac lists of Old Testament prophecies; see Bar Šalībī, *Against the Arabs*, ed. pp. 75–78, tr. pp. 67–71.

namely that he is the Son of God and the Son of man, for if he lied he would not be the one who was expected".⁵²

Prophecies thus seem to be endowed with the same word-validating function as miracles do; a rather novel claim judged from a Christian perspective, nor is it found in the *Muḥaṣṣal* as such. The origin of this argument may be evident, however, for Bar ʿEbrōyō simply seems to have applied Rāzī's Ash'arite conception of the confirmatory miracle to prophecies as well. His concluding statement suggests a motive for such an extension:

From these [prophecies], we have necessarily concluded that he is the true Christ whose coming was announced by the prophets. That Christ is not a simple human (*barnōšō šhīmō*), nor as one of the prophets (*ak ḥad men nbīyē*), his words testify. It is certain that his words are true, otherwise he would not be the one whose coming we expected, and because it is truly him, his words are necessarily true.⁵³

Extending the confirmatory character of miracles to confirmatory prophecies thus allows Bar ʿEbrōyō to drive home the point that any consideration of Christ as an ordinary human being or prophet ought to be excluded. His apologetic agenda is apparent, since what is explicitly rejected here is none other than the *Muslim* perception of Christ. As was the case with miracles, also here Christ's own words are brought in as evidence of his divine nature. It is not only Bar ʿEbrōyō's conception of miracles but also his understanding of prophecies that is thus determined by Rāzī's Ash'arite conception of the confirmatory miracle. We have still not entirely exhausted the role that Christ's claims about himself play in Bar ʿEbrōyō's apology, for these seem to be vital as well when it comes to properly grasping Christ's unique character.

Christ's Uniqueness Reconsidered

Bar ʿEbrōyō's third argument concerning Christ's uniqueness, unlike the argument for miracles and prophecies, has no common ground with Islamic proofs of prophecy. On the contrary, Bar ʿEbrōyō's attempt to assert the unique divine character of Christ diametrically opposes Muslim belief. Thus it comes naturally that this issue takes up considerable space in Bar ʿEbrōyō's refutations of

52 Khoury, III, 1, 1, pp. 38–39.

53 Khoury, III, 1, 1, pp. 40–41.

Islam. In the seventh Muslim objection, the various similarities between Christ and Adam, Moses, Elisha, John the Baptist, Enoch, and Elijah are presented in an effort to refute any possible ground for setting Christ ontologically apart from them. Also the Christian appeal to the fact that Muslims call Christ the ‘Word of God and his Spirit’ (cf. Qur’ān 4:171) is rejected for claiming uniqueness on his part:

Seventh objection. [...] Again, if you recognized that he is God because he was not born from sexual intercourse, observe that also Adam was born from neither man nor woman, and this is more marvelous than for someone to be born from a woman without a man. Again, if it is because of the astonishing miracles he has performed, observe that Moses did more than them, and it was possible for God to do more than them through whosoever (*b-īday kulnōš*), as Christ himself has said. Why not? Observe Elisha, who, not only during his life but also after his death, has revived a dead person who touched his bones; this is more marvelous. Again, if it is because he did not know sin, observe that John the Baptist has known it even less and was a virgin and a complete ascetic. Again, if it is because of his ascension, observe that Enoch and Elijah have also been raised and are still living and have not tasted death. Again, if it is because we say ‘Word of God and his Spirit’ (*Melteh d-Alōhō w-Rūḥeh*), observe that all creatures came into existence by the Word of God and his Spirit.⁵⁴

These arguments are countered one by one in the corresponding refutation: the creation of Adam without sexual intercourse is no more miraculous than the creation of the first horse or the first of any other species; the difference between Adam and John the Baptist in their attitude toward sexual abstinence is clear to those that discern;⁵⁵ saying that Enoch and Elijah were raised into heaven without dying is scripturally incorrect; the miracles of Enoch, Elijah, and Moses confirm their prophethood, for they said they were prophets, unlike Christ who said he was God and Son of God; if the statement is true that ‘Word

54 Khoury, III, 2, 7, pp. 108–111.

55 The direct comparison between Adam and John the Baptist without any reference to Christ comes unexpected in the context of defending Christ’s uniqueness. It appears that Bar ‘Ebrōyō somewhat over-abbreviated his source at this point, for the reference to Christ was originally present in Elias’ response, see Cheikho (ed.), “Maḡālis,” p. 116; Delly (tr.), *La théologie d’Élie*, p. 84.

of God and his Spirit' means that Christ is a creature, then every animal, pure and impure, should be called Word and Spirit of God as well. Because this is not the case, the refutation concludes, only Christ is so named in the Qur'ān because he is the incarnate Word of God.⁵⁶

As mentioned above, the material for this discussion is borrowed in a summarized and systematized manner from Elias of Nisibis' *Kitāb al-Majālis*. To gain insight into Bar 'Ebrōyō's own views, it might be interesting to further consider both the arguments he maintained and thus deemed valid, as well as those which he modified to his taste and thus deemed less adequate. First, he kept Elias' refutation of the claim that the creation of Adam without intercourse is at least as miraculous as Christ's virgin birth. Second, he uses Elias' rebuttal that it is not scriptural that Enoch ascended to heaven, as is the case with Christ. These borrowings suggest that Bar 'Ebrōyō so far agrees with Elias in viewing Christ's virgin birth, resurrection, and ascension as exclusively proper to him. This observation is also confirmed by his statement mentioned earlier that continuous testimony teaches us that Christ *appeared* and *left* the world in conditions in which no man ever appeared. Yet, as shown by the changes he made, Bar 'Ebrōyō does not fully agree with Elias' understanding of Christ. His above-mentioned 'Islamic' reinterpretation of the miracles performed by Christ also has its repercussions for considering Christ's uniqueness. Since miracles themselves are no longer a criterion to set Christ apart from the prophets, the ontological gap between Christ and the prophets seems at first sight to be significantly diminished. One might even say that Christ as perceived by Bar 'Ebrōyō acquires a certain Islamic touch, as he is brought closer to the Qur'ānic Jesus, who generates his miracles "by the permission of God" (*bi-idhni llāhi*),⁵⁷ and not in his own name and authority, as Christian apologists usually stressed. However, Bar 'Ebrōyō secures Christ's ontological distinction from mere prophets by arguing that only he has truly been divinely endorsed when claiming to be God and man. Therefore the fact that Christ, and he *alone*, made such a high claim is crucial for properly understanding his unique person.

56 Khoury, III, 2, 7, pp. 114–117.

57 See Qur'ān 3:49 and 5:110.

5 Bar 'Ebrōyō as a Christian Apologist

The image of the iceberg seems not misplaced in describing the way in which Bar 'Ebrōyō made use of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's prophetology in his treatise on the Incarnation. For whereas his use of it is only made manifest at the very end of his apology, when he quotes the *Muḥaṣṣal* by name to refute Muḥammad's claim to prophetic office, he nonetheless systematically used it as his model for the defense of the Incarnation developed up to that point. To the visible ten percent, the tip of the iceberg, thus corresponds an underlying implicit use of it, the remaining ninety percent of the ice floe. His main arguments proving that the union between God and man has effectively been realized in Christ, although firmly rooted in the Christian apologetic tradition, all bear at the same time the markings of Rāzī's proofs of prophecy. Although appealing to Islamic prophetology is not new as such in defending the doctrine of the Incarnation, especially not in Christian Arabic texts,⁵⁸ Bar 'Ebrōyō's systematic way of integrating it is of previously unseen proportions. In fact, earlier attempts to integrate Muslim thought into Christology in Syriac apologetic writings, albeit on a much smaller scale, has, to the best of my knowledge, so far only been found in the ninth century apologetic treatise of Nonnus of Nisibis, not coincidentally a bilingual author as well.⁵⁹ What seems to have made Bar 'Ebrōyō's profound modelling on Islamic prophetology possible is the fact that, contrary to earlier Christian apologists, he could depend on an established set of teachings of post-formative Islam through the *Muḥaṣṣal*, and more importantly, was willing to do so. The former requires knowledge of Muslim intellectual culture, the latter an openness to profit from its fruits. It should also be noted that an interesting Christian-Muslim exchange of apologetic strategies is taking place here, for whereas early Muslim apologists developed their 'proofs of prophecy' in response to the rejection of Muḥammad by Christians and Jews,⁶⁰ Bar 'Ebrōyō in turn frames his apology along these same lines in response to the Muslim rejection of the Incarnation. The Muslim strategy originally developed against Christianity thus found its Christian counterpart in Bar 'Ebrōyō.

58 See, for example, Griffith, "Faith and Reason in Christian Kalām".

59 Griffith, "The Apologetic Treatise of Nonnus of Nisibis," pp. 135–136: "In his 'Apologetic Treatise' Nonnus took the theology of attributes a step further in that he used it to argue for the divinity of Christ. [...] Actually, Nonnus was one of the first writers in Syriac to adopt such Islamically inspired modes of thought and expression". For an edition and Latin translation of Nonnus' apologetic treatise, see Van Roey, *Nonnus de Nisibe*.

60 See Stroumsa, "The Signs of Prophecy".

The opening words of Bar ‘Ebrōyō’s apologetic program in which he grounded his apology of the Incarnation in the principle of ‘continuity of testimonies’ (*tkībūt sōhdwōtō*), his Syriac equivalent of *tawātur*, foreshadowed the thorough modelling on Islamic prophetology about to follow. However, to discredit his approach as “trop théologique et trop rationnelle” because it intends to prove the Incarnation in a ‘necessary’ manner, simply fails to appreciate his efforts to articulate Christian doctrine in line with culturally dominant modes of thought, and hence also in the contextually *most plausible* manner.⁶¹ In particular Rāzī’s Ash‘arite stress on the claim to prophetic office requiring divine confirmation through the manifestation of a miracle further seems to have decisively determined his apologetics. This led Bar ‘Ebrōyō to redefine the function of both miracles and prophecies by investing them with a confirmatory function previously unheard of in Christian apologetics, which in turn also affected how Christ’s uniqueness should be perceived. No Christian apologist writing in Syriac or Arabic before Bar ‘Ebrōyō ever ascribed such a pivotal importance to Christ’s words recorded in the Gospel to be both the ‘Son of God’ and ‘Son of man’.⁶²

To Teule’s observation that Bar ‘Ebrōyō reinterpreted traditional Christian practices of spirituality in his *Ethicon* by borrowing from Ghazālī, it can now be added that he did something similar in the *Lamp of the Sanctuary*; namely, he reinterpreted classical Christological teachings by borrowing from Rāzī. Khoury’s assertion that he unoriginally kept the standard lines of Christian apologetics without any interest in renewal is therefore inadequate.⁶³ Rather,

61 Khoury, p. 9.

62 We should add, however, that this particular feature could render Bar ‘Ebrōyō’s apology significantly vulnerable to the Muslim accusation that Christians have tampered with their scriptures (*tahrif; tabdīl*), and therefore also with the verses in which Christ is recorded to have uttered these self-claims. Such a response might come quite naturally to Muslim polemicists, given the fact that Christ is already seen in the Qur’ān to sharply dissociate himself from the theological claims others say he made about himself (cf. Qur’ān 5:116–117). Furthermore, we signaled above as well the apparent tension between Christ as mediator of divine miracles and Christ as being divine himself. To push the issue further one might ask: Can Christ be *simul mediator et operator* of the miracles he manifested? Clearly, both the possible theological ambiguities as well as the later reception of his apology remain to be more fully assessed than we could possibly deliver here.

63 Khoury, p. 9; 11: “En somme, on se tromperait si l’on s’attendait à trouver en Bar Hebraeus un penseur profond ou un vrai novateur. Il est plutôt l’érudit aux connaissances prodigieusement étendues, qui recueille et ordonne excellemment, mais qui n’a ni le souci, le loisir, de rien renouveler”.

all of this amounts to yet another illustration of the creative and “masterly way” in which Bar ‘Ebrōyō managed to fuse his knowledge of Islamic scholarship with his own religious tradition into a new Christian synthesis.⁶⁴ An important instance of a “fuller integration of Muslim theological methods and concepts” into Christian theology, which David Thomas sought in vain in early Christian Arabic texts, thus has been found in this Syriac treatise of Bar ‘Ebrōyō, although the latter probably would disagree that such an integration of ‘foreign’ theological methods amounts “to deny[ing] fundamentally that theirs had integrity and completeness”.⁶⁵ More likely, he would assert to have maintained the customary Christian apologetic methods of arguing from miracles and prophecies—in this sense Khoury was correct—while nonetheless having woven them into a fresh Islamically inspired garment.

Looking back at Bar ‘Ebrōyō’s apologetics at the end of our study, we again seem confronted with his double stance towards Islam amply noted elsewhere. While, on the one hand, he shows a great admiration for Muslim scholarly achievements, on the other hand, he forcefully refutes those aspects of Islam perceived to be in conflict with Christian belief and practice. As such, the fact that he substantially appropriated Rāzī’s prophetology to sustain his Christology suggests that he must have encountered a certain force of persuasion and elegance in it; otherwise he may as well have stuck to more classical Christian formulations. His personal opinion about Rāzī seems to confirm such a positive view of the latter’s work, as witnessed from a biographical anecdote in his *Chronography*, in which he, interestingly enough, compares the Muslim scholar with Origen of Alexandria. Light can be found in the oeuvre of this “intelligent man (*gabrō mlīlō*)”; light that, so it seems, not only enlightened the Muslims, but his own Christology as well:

In this year, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī died at the age of sixty-three lunar years, an intelligent man and a great investigator among the Muslims. By him and by the many books which he composed, the Muslims in every land were and are being enlightened to this day. I would compare this man to Origen. Although the teachers of the Church were enriched and enlightened by his books, they nonetheless called him a heretic. So also the Muslims call this man an unbeliever (*kōpūrō*) and a follower of the teaching of Aristotle.⁶⁶

64 Takahashi, *Barhebraeus*, pp. 98–99.

65 Thomas, “Christian Borrowings from Islamic Theology,” p. 141.

66 Bar ‘Ebrōyō, *Gregorii Barhebraei Chronicon Syriacum*, ed. Bedjan, p. 425. Bar ‘Ebrōyō’s view

However, being a Christian, he obviously also rejects central aspects of Islam, even beyond his explicit refutations of the 'seventh heresy'. As it stands, the affirmation that also prophecies confirm Christ's claim to be divine is constructed in direct opposition to the Muslim view of Christ. More generally, it cannot be excluded that his entire endeavor to negotiate a common ground with Muslims their prophetology, is to some extent motivated by the intent to 'lapidate them with the same stones', to put matters rather harshly. Though absolute certainty about Bar 'Ebrōyō's inner motivations is ultimately beyond reach, it is manifest that his contribution largely deserves to be regarded as a significant attempt at unveiling Christ in the Islamicate world. One wonders what apologetic efforts of Bar 'Ebrōyō and other authors of the Syriac Renaissance might still await discovery.

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of Origen seems to have been rather positive as well, judging from his description in the list of heresies appended to the fourth base, a list which was not included in Khoury's edition but was published earlier by Nau: "They say about him [Origen] that he did not have a sound belief concerning the Trinity and that he denied the resurrection of the body, but he was rich in the word of teaching, and he wrote many commentaries on the Old and the New Testaments, so that many teachers of the Church up to Mōr John were enriched by and profited from his writings, that is to say, they gathered the roses and burned the thorns", see Nau, "Documents," p. 256 [146].

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